

## Tracks and animals

*How to filter talent to the trades early in life.*

I went to school in Hicksville, N.Y., starting in 1957 when my parents moved my big brother and me out of Manhattan, where we went to Saint Monica grade school because it was free. I believe there were about 70 kids in my first- and second-grade classes.

I never attended kindergarten. They gave me some sort of test and plopped me into first grade when I was five years old. I'm still trying to figure out that one.

The move to Hicksville began with Mrs. Gold's third-grade class. She was wonderful and she told my mother that she liked the way I wrote and told stories. I did OK until I got to multiplication and division. I got stuck there and learned years later that I have dyscalculia, which is like dyslexia but with numbers instead of words.

When I got to Hicksville High School, I was a numerical mess. My father, who once worked in a grocery store where he totaled sales furiously in pencil on the customers' brown paper bags, could not understand how I could not juggle numbers. It was so easy for him. He said I needed to work harder. I tried, but no dice.

"You're a stupid kid," my father said.

And that's how I felt. I still have a tough time with seven times eight and all the rest of it.

But during those school years I was soaring with writing and I was reading everything I could get my hands on. In junior high, a teacher sent me to the principal's office because I had philosophy books on my stack.

"Why are you reading these?" the principal asked.

"I'm trying to understand love," I said.

He shook his head and sent me back to class.

### Finding a path

We had tracks at Hicksville High School. Track 1 was for the really smart kids. Track 2 was for the regular kids. Track 3 was for



the stupid kids. That's what we called them. Stupid. It was OK for me to say that because I rode on Track 3 in math and Spanish. I was on Track 1 for everything that had to do with words, but totally stupid when it came to substituting numbers for words and foreign words for English words. I spent every July and August of my high-school years taking remedial summer school. I took Spanish 1 and Algebra five times apiece before I was able to just barely pass the regents exams and graduate.

But I could write. And I sure could read.

There was another path in Hicksville High School. We called it shop. This was for the kids who hated everything academic. Most of them looked like Fonzie. Billy Joel was one of those kids when we started high school together. He was taking mechanical drawing. One day, he had enough of that business and gave me his signed T-square. He was going to focus on music instead of blueprints. He told me that someday he was going to be more famous than Herman's Hermits.

I tossed his T-square a year after graduation because I had no use for it.

Stupid, right?

They called the shop kids "animals." These kids learned how to fix cars, or do electrical work, or carpentry, or plumbing — all those skills that require the use of hands and brains that can touch and see things in a special way. The Lovely Marianne, who was also in Hicksville High School at the same time as me, was a shop kid. She learned how to be a key-punch operator, a job that no longer exists. I didn't meet her until three years after graduation. There were a lot of kids in our school.

Back then, many people felt sorry for the shop kids. They'd never go on to college, and wasn't that the American Dream for our parents? That we should be better educated than they were?

But education comes in many flavors and so many of those shop kids went on to own businesses and to be wildly successful. And none of those animals had huge college loans to pay off.

They lived their own American Dream.

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## heating help

### German engineering

I was in Germany a few years ago and a woman who lives there told me about their school system. It reminded me very much of my Hicksville schools during a time long gone. Shop is pretty much gone now and it's not politically correct to place kids in tracks or to call them animals, or to make them feel less than Harvard or MIT material, which most kids aren't. But it's different in Germany,

do usually choose French. Their education prepares them for mid-level careers in sales, nursing, civil service or secretarial work. After graduation, these students also qualify for apprenticeships in the trades or in the medical field. Or, if they wish, they may continue their education. But note that even if they don't continue their schooling, they are now fully qualified to work at good-paying jobs. And they get those jobs.

***In America, if you don't go to college, people shake their heads and feel sorry for you. Shop is gone and everyone gets a trophy.***

Here's what that woman told me.

Primary school begins for kids when they're six years old and ends when they're 10 years old. Kids are assessed at the end of their second year, when they're just seven years old. If they didn't do well, they will have to repeat the first year. Or a kid may get pushed ahead a year, as I was at St. Monica's, even though I couldn't do numbers.

At 10 years old, the teachers in Germany will recommend further schooling for each child based on what they've learned about that child. The parents have a say in this, of course, but the woman told me that most parents go along with the teachers' recommendation. So at 10, each kid goes on a path, not based on what the kid wants, but on what the grownups want, and they base that on what they honestly see in the kid.

It used to be that way here in America. No more.

This is what comes next for the German kids: *Gymnasium* is for the really smart academic kids. They'll be going on to college and then advanced degrees. These kids must learn two foreign languages, usually English, French, Spanish or Latin. They'll also delve into art, music and sports. Their last two years of study in what we would call high school is very heavy on mathematics and it ends with a tough test. If the student passes that test he or she may enter college.

That's Track 1 on steroids.

Track 2 is *Realschule* and this is where you'll find the intermediary students. They must take at least one foreign language, which generally is English. The student also can opt for a second language and those who

*Hauptschule* is the least-academic program. The kids who go this way are the kids who will go into the trades. Their schooling focuses on math and computer science. Each student will also learn English. All of this goes at a slower pace than the other schools. The kids attend vocational school until they're 16 and then will enter an apprenticeship. They can continue their schooling part-time until they're 18. This is the German version of shop.

Oh, and please note how everyone learns at least one foreign language while growing up in Germany. It's the same across most of Europe.

During the years when I attended the big ISH show in Frankfurt, I would see the *Hauptschule* kids wandering the floors. They were young and ravenous for knowledge. They moved in packs, like wolf cubs, grabbing the samples and the brochures. Looking, looking. Learning. Laughing.

You're a 10-year-old kid in Germany and you get launched in a direction that's going to be good for you and good for the German economy. And who gets to decide your direction?

Your teachers and your parents.

In America, if you don't go to college, people shake their heads and feel sorry for you. Shop is gone and everyone gets a trophy.

I miss the tracks and the animals. **pme**

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